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Word order and linear modification in English

PART ONE

ANALYSING SENTENCE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

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Word Order and Linear Modification in English

Abstract

The paper examines the role of linear modification in shaping the syntactic structure of an English sentence. Linear modification – the principle of presenting ideas in an order of gradual rise in importance – co-determines word order in all Indo-European languages, though it is less powerful in languages with fixed word order than in languages with flexible word order. English syntax changed quite significantly on the way from Old English to Modern English. The shift from flexible word order to fixed word order, which was closely related to certain phonological and morphological features of English, was accompanied by a reduction of the power of linear modification as a word-order principle. The paper tests this reduction by an analysis of written Old English and Modern English texts.

Key words

Word order; linear modification; functional sentence perspective; Old English; Modern English; word-order principles

1. The concept of linear modification

The term *linear modification* was introduced in linguistic theory by Bolinger (1952: 1125), who claims that within a sentence, 'gradation of position creates gradation of meaning when there are no interfering factors'. Bolinger's study of the relationship between syntax and semantics suggests that speakers and writers tend to express pieces of information in order of increasing information value. The placement of less important (context dependent or accessible) ideas in initial position and more important ideas in final position reflects the processes taking place in the communication participants' minds. Word order respecting linear

modification is referred to as *objective* and word order violating linear modification as *subjective* (see Mathesius 1975: 83–4). Below are examples of objective (1) and subjective (2) word order.

(1)   In the middle of the night the villagers heard a fearsome cry.
(2)   A fearsome cry could be heard in the middle of the night.

2. Word order and information structure

Mathesius (1975: 153–63), Firbas (1992: 117–140) and Vachek (1994: 32–40) identify principles determining word order in Indo-European languages. The most important are the linearity principle (ordering elements in accordance with linear modification) and the grammatical principle (ordering elements in accordance with a grammaticalized word-order pattern).[1] The linearity principle is stronger in languages with flexible word order, the speakers of which are able to produce 'gradation of meaning' more easily than speakers of languages with fixed word order, in which the linearity principle is subordinate to the grammatical principle. In English, the grammatical principle enforces the sequence subject (S), verb (V), object (O), complement (C), adverbial (A). Since objects, complements and adverbials often express more important ideas than subjects, a large number of English sentences observe the grammatical principle without necessarily violating the linearity principle.

Linear modification operates not only at the syntactic level but also at the level of information structure of a sentence. According to the Brno theory of functional sentence perspective created by Firbas, the interpretation of the information structure of a sentence relies on specific syntactic, semantic, contextual, and – in spoken language – prosodic criteria (cf. e.g. Firbas 1989 and 1992; Dušková 1985 and 2002; Svoboda 1981 and 1989; and Chamonikolasová 2005 and 2007). Different degrees of communicative prominence (dynamism) carried by communicative units (sentence elements) correspond to different FSP functions. A simplified scale starting with the least dynamic, i.e. thematic elements, and ending with the most dynamic, i.e. rhematic elements is presented below:

> theme proper (ThPr)
> diatheme (DTh)
> transition proper (TrPr)
> transition (Tr)
> rheme (Rh)
> rheme proper (RhPr)

Sentences with objective word order starting with thematic elements and ending with rhematic elements comply with the principle of linear modification, while in sentences with subjective word order starting with rhematic elements and ending

with thematic elements, linear modification is violated (cf. examples 2 and 3-Pr); partial violation of the principle of linear modification occurs e.g. in sentences with a rhematic element in penultimate position followed by a thematic element in final position.

3. Word order in Modern English

As mentioned above, Modern English is an analytical language with limited morphological variation and a relatively fixed word order governed by the grammatical principle. Owing to the operation of the grammatical principle, variation within word-order patterns in English is rather limited. Unmarked sentence patterns contain a subject immediately followed by the verb. The remaining sentence elements occur in post-verbal positions; non-obligatory adverbials are alternatively placed before the subject in initial position. Quirk et al. (1985: 720–21) lists the following unmarked sentence patterns:

(3)   SV   The sun is shining.
(4)   SVO   He'll get a surprise.
(5)   SVC   He's getting angry.
(6)   SVA   He got through the window.
(7)   SVOO   He got her a splendid present.
(8)   SVOC   Most students have found her reasonably helpful.
(9)   SVOA   He got himself into trouble.

The sentences above all observe the leading grammatical principle. With the exception of sentence (3), they also observe the linearity principle: they start with thematic context-dependent or easily accessible elements carrying low degrees of communicative dynamism and end with context-independent rhematic elements.

When occurring in the most natural context, sentence (3) is interpreted as a sentence presenting the rhematic phenomenon *the sun* on the scene. The subject carries the highest degree of communicative dynamism and the highest degree of prosodic prominence (indicated by capitalization):

(3-Pr) [What is the weather like today?] – The SUN is shining.

Under very special contextual conditions, the subject of example (3) can perform the function of a thematic quality bearer; the highest degree of communicative dynamism is then carried by its quality "shining":

(3-Q)   [The sun is now probably hidden in the clouds, isn't it?] – No. The sun is SHINING.

Example (3-Q) is in harmony with both the grammatical and the linearity principles. Example (3-Pr) complies with the grammatical principle but violates the linearity principle – its word order is *subjective*. *The sun* is rhematic but has to be placed in the initial position because it fulfils the syntactic function of the subject. The grammatical principle in this case acts as a factor interfering with a gradual rise in communicative value. [2] However, the deviation from the linearity principle, which is subordinate to the grammatical principle in English, does not render the sentence marked.[3]

Although the grammatical principle is superior to the linearity principle in English, in certain types of existential sentences, the struggle between the two principles ends with a partial or complete victory of the subordinate linearity principle:

(10)   There was a large cloud in the sky.
(11)   Next to the window hung a small picture.

The development of sentences containing the existential *there* is related to the natural need of the speaker to present ideas in the objective order (see Breivik 1983). The operator *there* occupies the initial position of the grammatical subject, satisfying the grammatical principle; the postponement of the actual rhematic subject/phenomenon satisfies the linearity principle (10). Existential sentences without existential *there* like (11) are reflections of earlier stages of syntactic development. However, they are rather rare and mostly restricted to written language.

4. Word order in earlier stages of the development of English

The syntactic structure of present-day English outlined above results from a substantial transformation of the syntactic structure of Old English and Middle English. While Old English was an inflected language with a relatively flexible word order, in Modern English – as illustrated above – word order variation is very limited. The shift from flexible to fixed word order is the result of a number of linguistic and sociolinguistic changes in the history of the English language. The most significant factor acknowledged by most scholars is the levelling of inflection accompanied by the loss of morphological signals indicating semantic relations between syntactic elements of a sentence, e.g. the relation between the agent (subject) and the patient (object) of the process expressed by the verb. Other, less significant, factors affecting the mentioned transformation are the operation of the principle of end-weight, the integration and grammaticalization of language units expressing afterthought, and language acquisition in contact areas (cf. e.g. Seoane 2006 and Jucker 1995).

The gradual modification of English morphology and syntax resulted in a typological shift of English from a predominantly synthetic to a predominantly analytical language. The wide range of grammatical changes involved in this process

have been described e.g. by Firbas (1957); Mathesius (1975); Breivik (1983) and (1991); Vachek (1994); Sauer (1995); Baekken (1998); Čermák (2000); Schendl (2001); Pintzuk and Taylor (2006); and Seoane (2006).

The syntactic change of the English language manifests itself in the word-order patterns applied at different stages of the development of the language. Numerous studies (e.g. Breivik 1983: 358–403) describe Old English as a V2 language, i.e., a language with the verb-second constraint similar syntactically to Modern German and Dutch. The common feature of languages that have or have had the verb-second constraint is the development of dummy subjects such as the existential *there* or the dummy *it* in English (cf. Haiman 1974; Breivik 1983: 358–403 and 1991). During its historical development, English changed from a verb-second language to a verb-medial language: in Modern English, the verb has a tendency to follow the subject and to precede the object or adverbial and complement, but not necessarily as the second element in a sentence. Even if the sentence starts with an adverbial, the verb is not inserted between the adverbial and the subject but occurs in the medial position, i.e. after the adverbial and the subject.

Looking at the gradual syntactic change of English from a different angle, some authors (cf. Pintzuk and Taylor 2006) describe it as a change from an OV to a VO language, i.e. from a language in which the object precedes the verb to a language in which the object follows the verb. This change is closely related to the loss of the verb-second constraint and represents just another consequence of the major shift of English from a synthetic inflectional language with a relatively free word order to an analytical non-inflectional language with a grammaticalized word order.

5. Analysis

The power of linear modification as word order principle in the history of the English language will be tested by the analysis of the communicative loads of initial and final syntactic elements in Old English and Modern English texts. The material analyzed includes selected extracts from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,*[4] and the *Chronicle of Britain and Ireland* (1992).[5] The Modern English chronicle is written in a contemporary language and style but it resembles ancient chronicles in form: historical events are presented as if they happened recently. The material consists of 100 Old English and 100 Modern English sentences.

Below are examples of the analysis of the syntactic and information structure patterns of sentences selected from the two chronicles.[6] The syntactic analysis is based on conceptions presented in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk at al. 1985) and the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al. 1999). Each main independent clause and each conjoined main clause (i.e. each of the clauses conjoined by a co-ordinate conjunction) represents one sentence pattern and one field of distribution of communicative dynamism. Subordinate clauses are considered as a component of the main clause functionally equivalent to simple (non-clausal) elements; clausal and non-clausal

sentence elements are denoted by identical symbols – for example, 'A' denotes adverbial phrases as well as adverbial clauses. Conjunctions and relative pronouns are considered to be in 'zero' position and are therefore not counted as initial elements.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle:

(12)   We ‖   witon ‖ oþer igland her beeastan, þær ge magon eardian gyf ge wyllað.
         We ‖   know ‖ about an island here to the east where you may dwell if you wish.
         S   V   O
         ThPr   TrPr+Tr   RhPr

(13)   7 gyf hwa eow wiðstent,   ‖ we ‖ eow ‖ fultumiað ‖ þæt ge hit magon gegangan.
         And if someone to you stands up,‖ we ‖ you ‖ will support ‖ that you may gain it.
                                 A   S   O   V   A
                                DTh   ThPr   ThPr   TrPr+Tr   RhPr

(14)   Ða   ‖ genamon ‖ þa Walas   ‖   7...
         Then ‖ went   ‖ the Welsh   ‖   and...
          A   V   S
         DTh   TrPr+RhPr   DTh

(15)   Suþonweard ‖ hit ‖   hæfdon   ‖   Bryttas.
         Southward   ‖ it   ‖   possessed ‖   the Britons.
            A   O   V   S
           DTh   ThPr   TrPr+Tr   RhPr

Chronicle of Britain and Ireland:

(16)   Patricius (Patrick), the missionary who converted many Irish to Christianity, ‖ has died.
                                       S   V
                                    RhPr   TrPr+Tr

(17)   (The newcomers derive from a variety of Germanic tribes)
          but ‖ [S] ‖ fall ‖ into three principal groups: Angles, Saxons, and Jutes.
              [S] [7]   V   A
            [ThPr] TrPr+Tr   RhPr

(18)   In his *Confession* ‖ he ‖   tells ‖ how he had a second vision in which …
                        A   S   V   O
                       DTh   ThPr   TrPr+Tr   RhPr

(19)   Opposite the mouth of the Rhine ‖ is ‖ a great island, divided down the middle by a wall.
                          A   V   S
                        DTh   TrPr+Tr   RhPr

6. Results

The results of the analysis of the Old English and Modern English texts are presented in Tables 1–6 below. Tables 1 and 2 provide a survey of word-order patterns in the two texts; Tables 3–6 indicate the communicative loads of initial and final sentence elements. Elliptical subjects are not included in the data because they do not have any formal realization; in clauses with elliptical subjects, the initial position is usually occupied by the verb, performing the transitional function.

Table 1. Word-order patterns in Old English (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) [8]

Basic word-order pattern	Variations within the basic word-order patterns	No. of occurrences
SV	(A)**SV**, (O)**S**(O)(C)**V**	16
SVO	(A)**SVO**(O)(A), **S**v^9**OV**(A)	21
SVA	(A)**SVA**(A), (A)**SvAV**(A)	12
SVC	(A)**SVC**(A)	9
SOV	(A)**SOV**(O)(A)	9
AVS	(A)**AV**(A)(C)**S**(A)(O), **AvSV**(A)	30
OVS	(A)**OVS**	3
Total		100

Table 2. Word-order patterns in Modern English (*Chronicle of Britain and Ireland*)

Basic word-order pattern	Variations within the basic word-order patterns	No. of occurrences
SV	(A)**SV, S**$_\%$**V**(A)**S**$_\%$ [10]	13
SVO	(A)**SVO**(O)(A)	15
SVA	(A)**SVA**(A)(O),	50
SVC	(A)**SVC**(A)	14
sVS	**s**[11]**V**(C)(A)**S**(A)	7
AVS		1
Total		100

Table 3. FSP functions of initial syntactic elements in Old English (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*)

		S	V	O	A	C	Total	
ThPr	theme	14	---	---	11	---	25	85
DTh		6	---	15	39	---	60	
TrPr+Tr	transition	---	15	---	---	---	15	
RhPr	rheme	---	---	---	---	---	---	
Total		20	15	15	50	---	100	

Table 4. FSP functions of initial syntactic elements in Modern English (*Chronicle of Britain and Ireland)*

		S+s	V	O	A	C	Total	
ThPr	theme	20	---	---	---	---	20	74
DTh		29	---	---	25	---	54	
TrPr+Tr	transition	---	17	---	---	---	17	
RhPr	rheme	9	---	---	---	---	9	
Total		58	17	---	25	---	100	

Table 5. FSP functions of final syntactic elements in Old English (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*)

		S	V	O	A	C	Total	
ThPr	theme	---	---	---	---	---	---	7
DTh		2	---	1	3	---	7	
TrPr+Tr	transition	---	7	---	---	---	7	
RhPr	rheme	6	13	20	42	5	86	
Total		8	20	21	47	5	100	

Table 6. FSP functions of final syntactic elements in Modern English (*Chronicle of Britain and Ireland*)

		S	V	O	A	C	Total	
ThPr	theme	---	---	1	---	---	1	17
DTh		---	---	2	13	1	16	
TrPr+Tr	transition	---	3	---	---	---	3	
RhPr	rheme	8	4	19	34	15	80	
Total		8	7	22	47	16	100	

The results of the analysis of word-order patterns presented in Tables 1 and 2 testify to a greater flexibility of word order in the Old English text compared to the Modern English text. While the basis of the majority of Modern English sentences (92) is the pattern SV (SV, SVA, SVO, and SVC), the Old English material contains a greater variety of sentence patterns (SV, SOV, OVS, AVS); in almost one third of them, the subject is preceded by the verb.[12]

Tables 3 and 4 provide a survey of syntactic and FSP functions of elements occurring in the initial position. The most frequent in Old English are thematic adverbials (50), followed by thematic subjects (20), thematic objects (15), and transitional verbs (15). In Modern English, there is no object in initial position, and thematic subjects (49) are more frequent than thematic adverbials (25). The modern English text contains 9 presentation sentences with initial rhematic subjects, which do not occur in the Old English material at all.[13] The results of the

comparison of sentence beginnings in Old English and Modern English texts presented in Tables 3 and 4 suggest certain differences in the communicative loads of initial sentence elements. Although most of the elements (85/74) in both texts perform thematic functions, the ratio of themes is slightly lower in Modern English, where 9 initial elements perform rhematic functions. Both Old English and Modern English texts contain initial transitional elements in conjoined co-ordinate clauses after a conjunction (15/17).

Tables 5 and 6 indicate the frequency of different syntactic and FSP functions of sentence elements in final position. In the Old English text, the most frequent element in final position is rhematic adverbial (42), followed by rhematic object (20), verb (13), subject (6), and complement (5). A small number of final elements are non-rhematic units: thematic subjects occurring in sentence final position due to verb-second constraint and the use of the adverbial *þa* in initial position (cf. example 14); thematic adverbials and objects expressing settings; and transitional verbal units[14]. In the Modern English text, the most frequent unit in final position is rhematic adverbial (34), followed by rhematic object (19), complement (15), subject (8), and verb (4). Most of the rhematic subjects in final position are split subjects[15] or subjects in cleft sentences; sentences like example 19 are exceptional. Non-rhematic elements occurring in final position include thematic adverbials and a small number of thematic objects and complements, and transitional verbs. The comparison of data in Tables 5 and 6 suggests that the tendency for the final placement of rhematic elements is very strong in both Old and Modern English. The ratio of rhematic elements in Modern English, however, is slightly lower than in Old English (80/86).

The comparison of Old English and Modern English chronicles suggests that the syntactic change from Old English to Modern English was accompanied by a reduction of the flexibility within word order patterns; an increase in the frequency of initial subjects at the expense of initial adverbials and objects; an increase in the potential of the initial syntactic element to convey rhematic information and to express the goal of the message of the whole sentences; and a slight reduction of the frequency of rhematic elements in final position. The change of the hierarchy within the word-order principles during the development of the English language, however, did not result in a *significant* increase in sentences with subjective word order owing to the gradual development of sentence structures like existential there-sentences and cleft sentences that satisfy both the grammatical and the linearity principle.

Notes

1   These are supplemented by the rhythmical and the emphasis principle.
2   In languages with flexible word order, such element naturally occurs in final position (cf. the Czech sentence *Svítí slunce* [Is shining the sun.]).
3   (3-Pr) is in reality more natural than (3-Q), which only functions in a rather constructed context.

4   Manuscript D, Cotton Tiberius B iv (copied from older manuscripts around 1050): Introduction
        and entries for years 47, 62–68, 716, and 755.
5   Entries for years 480, 490, 500, 540, 550, and 563.
6   This paper presents a simplified form of FSP analysis. In sentences with more thematic
        elements Firbas (1992) distinguishes the following units: theme proper, theme proper oriented
        theme, diatheme oriented theme, and diatheme. In this paper, the abbreviation ThPr denotes
        themes proper and theme proper oriented themes; DTh denotes diathemes and diatheme
        oriented themes.
7   Elliptical subject.
8   Word order in OE was influenced by a wide range of factors. For instance, sentences with
        subjects expressed by a personal pronoun rarely showed verb-second; in sentences with
        initial *þa*, by contrast, verb-second was categorical (cf. Fischer & Wurff 2006: 184). Since
        the focus of this paper is the communicative load of initial and final sentence elements, these
        factors have not been dealt with. However, it should be noted that of the 30 occurrences of
        the AVS pattern listed in Table 1, 25 contain the adverbial *þa* preceding the verb.
9   Auxiliary verb.
10   Split subject.
11   Dummy (grammatical) subject.
12   Shann (1964: 13) and Bean (1983: 67) indicate a lower percentage of the patterns VS. Due
        to different categorization of sentence types, however, a precise comparison of the data is not
        possible.
13   However, some of the rhematic subjects in the Old English material occur in a post-initial
        position following the adverb *þa*.
14   Most transitional verbs in final position are preceded by rhematic elements, e.g. "...7 wæs
        heora heretoga Reoda gehaten".
15   Example of a split subject: "Reports are circulating in this region of a decisive victory...".

Acknowledgement

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